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### Uplifting the Non-Custodial Parent

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# Uplifting the Non-Custodial Parent

ALINA BALTAZAR

## The Text

“AS A FATHER (THE NON-CUSTODIAL PARENT) HAS COMPASSION ON HIS CHILDREN, SO THE LORD HAS COMPASSION ON THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.”  
PSALM 103:13, NIV

## Purpose

The purpose of this seminar is to raise the awareness of the challenges and blessings of being a non-custodial parent. This seminar further helps to promote co-parenting between the non-custodial parent(s) and the custodial parent(s) as they seek to adjust to a “new normal” pattern of family living. Finally, this seminar seeks to present ways in which the church can be a safe haven for both the non-custodial parent and the custodial parent as they work together to rear their child and/or children.

## Intended Audience

Non-custodial and custodial parents, church leaders, including but not limited to: Pastors, local family ministry leaders, elders, men’s and women’s ministries leaders, Sabbath

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School, youth and Pathfinder leaders, deacons and deaconesses, church school principals and teachers, school board, and church board leaders. All of these leaders should know how to support the non-custodial parent and the children for which he or she cares. This two-hour seminar can also be broken into two one-hour sessions.

## Introduction

Though a majority of children live with both parents (69%), that percentage has been decreasing over the last several decades (US Census Bureau, 2016). In 1960 88% of children lived with both parents. The second most common family form is children living with a single mother (23%). That percentage has also been increasing, especially considering that just 8 percent of children lived with a single mother in 1960. In that same period of time, the percentage of children living with only their father went from 1 percent to 4 percent.

Why such a drastic change? Divorce rates increased dramatically in the 1970s, though they have stabilized over the last few decades to around 50 percent of all marriages. Another change is the increase of cohabitation, which leads to a higher percentage of never married parents. Thus, millions of children do not live with one of their biological parents. This situation can be devastating to both children

and parents. This seminar aims to educate and inform the church and surrounding community in order to aid children and parents caught up in this difficult situation.

### **Non-custodial Parent Defined**

The typical custody arrangement between divorced or never married parents is for one parent to have primary custody and the other parent to be the non-custodial parent. This means one parent has physical custody where the child resides with the custodial parent on a regular basis. Usually both parents have legal custody so the parents can make legal decisions for their child. The courts usually arrange for the non-custodial parent to have pre-determined visitation times. If the parents reside in the same area, children usually stay with the non-custodial parent every other weekend and one evening a week. With school aged children, school holidays are often split between the two parents. When the parents live in different cities, children are flown as unaccompanied minors to the other parent's city to stay with them for a pre-determined amount of time. The out of town non-custodial parent may see the child in their hometown during visitation times.

Non-custodial parenting can take many forms. Traditionally the non-custodial parent has been a divorced father, but times are changing. With women increasingly entering the work force and pursuing careers, mothers are increasingly the non-custodial parent. There are also times when the mother is unable to financially provide or care for the children in her charge. In these instances a court may determine that the father can better provide for the children. With marriage rates decreasing, not all non-custodial parents were married to their ex. Each situation has unique challenges.

### **Struggles the Non-custodial Parent Faces**

By definition, the non-custodial parent spends less time with their child(ren) than the custodial parent. The children live with the

custodial parent on a regular basis. The custodial parent gets to experience life's ups and downs in real time and enjoy spontaneous conversations with their child. The limited time that the non-custodial parent has with a child can harm the parent/child bond which negatively affects the relationship. This is particularly problematic when a child is very young. Many states do not allow babies to spend nights away from home with the non-custodial parent. Research has increasingly found that babies benefit from a varied environment, though consistency and routine are also important. Parent/child bonding happens in a relatively small window when children are babies. The more time the child spends with an adult, the more likely they are to bond.

Divorce has been seen similar to a death. There is a loss of a relationship and a grief over the future that they may have had together. One way that these situations differ is the public nature of divorce. When a spouse dies, their secrets are buried with them. Divorces are public affairs handled through the courts where records and transcripts are easily accessed by the public, but courts are not the only place where information is made known. Each spouse will reach out to their social network, often making negative statements about the other spouse in order to garner support. This can lead to public shaming that may follow the divorced parent for years.

The non-custodial parent is seen in a more negative light, especially non-custodial mothers—who are generally not the norm. Society sees non-custodial parents as dead-beats who are uninvolved in their child's lives. Non-custodial mothers fare even worse. They are judged as drug addicts or mentally ill. With women increasingly pursuing careers it may be better for the child to reside primarily with their father, either short or long term.

The non-custodial parent's family may not understand the situation. Grandparents want to be able to see their grandkids on holidays and birthdays, but that may not happen due to the custody agreement. This can lead to hostility and lack of support for the non-

custodial parent from their family support system. In addition, the custodial parent may cut off extended family members from even seeing the child.

Families aren't the only support system that get involved with custody arrangements. Church members and leaders also are caught in the middle. When there is a separation and both parents attend the same church, members often feel like they have to choose sides. Church members typically side with the custodial parent, who is usually the mother. It can be difficult for children to sit with their mother one Sabbath and then their father on another Sabbath. The child may feel like they are being disloyal to their custodial parent. Non-custodial fathers can feel pushed out of their home church because of the judgment and negativity from church members/leaders. Some non-custodial fathers may choose a different church or not attend at all. When the child is with their father every other weekend, he or she may not attend church, which could negatively affect their faith development.

### Parenting Time Guidelines

States have predetermined the minimum amount of time non-custodial parents have with their children and how to balance holidays and vacation times. Parenting time guidelines are considered the "Bible" for non-custodial and custodial parents. Church leaders and school administrators should be aware of these guidelines when they get involved in custody disagreements. Even when children are over 18 years of age, these guidelines are often followed by the family. See examples of Parenting Time Guidelines (the title may vary from state to state) in the states of Michigan and Indiana.

Indiana Time Guidelines:

<https://secure.in.gov/judiciary/rules/parenting/parenting.pdf>

Michigan Parenting Time Guidelines:

[http://courts.mi.gov/Administration/SCAO/Resources/Documents/Publications/Manuals/focb/pt\\_gdlns.pdf](http://courts.mi.gov/Administration/SCAO/Resources/Documents/Publications/Manuals/focb/pt_gdlns.pdf)

### Parental Alienation

Preoccupied with their own distress, recently separated parents are often distressed and may badmouth their ex. This is normal. Estranged parents turn to sympathetic listeners. Children are inevitably drawn into these conversations. There are situations where this bad-mouthing is not normal and can lead to parental alienation. It may appear the child is choosing to reject the non-custodial parent for legitimate reasons and that may be the case, but often it is because the favored parent has manipulated the child into alienating the other parent.

Dr. Richard Warshak in his book *Divorce Poison* (p. 55-56) defines pathological parental alienation as:

- Unreasonable, persistent, negative attitudes (anger, hatred, fear, distrust, or anxiety) about a parent who was viewed more favorably in the past. Such attitudes are often freely expressed to the parent and others.
- No apparent guilt for treating the parent with malice, contempt, and utter disrespect. Accepts money and gifts without gratitude.
- Explanations for the hatred or fear that are trivial, irrational, inadequate, and out of proportion to the rejected parent's behavior (or false allegations of abuse).
- One-sided view of parents. Alienated parents are described in negative terms and the other parent is seen as nearly perfect.
- In conflict between the parents, the child always sides with the favored parent without using critical thinking or considering other perspectives. They want to testify against the other parent in court.
- The child uses words the alienating parent uses.
- Preoccupied with the favored parent while with the rejected parent. Including lengthy phone calls and texting.
- Declaration of independence. They say the rejection of their parent is their decision and they have not been influenced.
- Hatred by association: The child rejects the alienated parent's relatives, friends, and even pets despite having a history of gratifying relationships.
- This is done consistently over a long period of time.

The rejected parent may feel it is best for the child if they just pull away until the child is more accepting of a relationship. Unfortunately, time away from the rejected parent typically worsens the relationship and it may never be mended. The loss of the relationship feels like a death of a child to the rejected parent. This then leads to discouragement by the rejected parent and eventually more pulling away. The alienated child can then say they were “rejected” by the alienated parent.

Children who grow up without a relationship and involvement by both parents have poorer outcomes. When a father departs later in a child’s life it was associated with increased adolescent delinquency (Markowitz & Ryan, 2016). Boys with absent fathers were more likely to become absent fathers and girls who grew up without fathers were more likely to have absent partners (Pougnnet, et al., 2012).

Clinicians have found that there are better ways for the alienated parent to respond to the situation. Dr. Warshack offers the following tips:

- Communicate empathy to your child. The feelings your child has are real to them
- Use indirect communication by talking about a “friend” who has parents who are divorced with one parent being alienated. With older children you can talk about how other kids their age react to the same situation.
- Have your child “accidentally” overhear you speaking to someone else about the situation. Talk about what you and your child have lost, how sad you feel for the child, and how different things used to be. Talk about the past signs of a loving relationship. Speak of your confusion and puzzlement about the dramatic change. Tie the alienation to the divorce and your ex’s anger at you. Do not focus your anger on your ex.
- Discuss with children other ways people are manipulated. Talk about advertisements, then talk about how politicians try to smear their opponents, and finally how divorced couples can do the same.
- Wait until your child is in a receptive mood to talk about something your child may argue with you about. Stay away from hot topics.

- Third parties can serve as a bridge between you and your child (extended family member, teacher, or pastor). Have someone who is sympathetic to your plight, but who also has a good relationship with your child, try to build a bridge.
- Arrange for your children to see you with other people who hold you in high regard.
- Do activities that are fun for both of you. One may have to be creative to find something they are willing to do with you that they think is fun.
- Memorialize these fun times. Document, display, and frequently refer to positive times from the past and present. A third party could ask, “What old movies from the past give you positive memories?” The answer may then offer an opportunity to reflect on good memories together.
- Go on a nice vacation.
- Spend time alone with each sibling. Focus first on the child that is least alienated. Prepare that child for peer pressure from other family members.
- Introduce the idea of your child to countries that remain neutral in a war, ex. Switzerland. Hopefully, they will choose to not take sides in the conflict between their parents.
- You may have to agree to disagree with your child.
- Build on your faith’s focus on telling the truth and forgiveness to aid in change and healing.

What if Exodus 20:12 read this way: “Honor your (Non-Custodial Parent) and your (Custodial Parent), that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you”?

## Dating and Remarriage

When the non-custodial parent starts to date, hostility with the ex can increase. There can be jealousy and fear could arise. Jealousy happens when the custodial parent believes that the non-custodial parent has a better life than they do or vice versa. With reduced parental responsibilities, the non-custodial parent can have a more active dating life, but an active dating life can also interfere with parental involvement child-related events that happen

at school, for instance. It can also get in the way of going to court to advocate for his or her parental rights in a given situation.

If the non-custodial or custodial parent gets married, a major adjustment has to occur for all involved. Blended families are particularly fragile, with higher rates of divorce. Experts say it takes at least four years for a blended family to adjust to their new roles and develop healthy relationships. Both biological parents need to be reassured of the importance of their role in the child's life. It helps if the ex gets to know the new spouse in order to increase his or her comfort level with the new spouse being a caregiver for the child. A vacation together with the new blended family can help, but parties involved must be aware that remarriage can bring an escalation of parental alienation. This should be caught early and resolved as soon as possible by listening to one another and then working on addressing the concerns raised.

Even though blended families are not God's ideal, there are many examples of blended families in the Bible whom the Lord has blessed. Abraham took a second wife and had a child with her in his attempt to fulfill God's promise of many descendants (Genesis 16-17). It led to jealousy between Sarah and Hagar, which in turn led to family disunity and rejection of Hagar and Ishmael. The Lord still blessed and cared for Hagar and Ishmael.

Joseph and his brothers are famous for their jealousy of each other (Genesis 37-46). It started with Jacob marrying the wrong sister, then marrying the sister whom he loved. This jealousy led to the birth of twelve sons. Without that jealousy Joseph would never have ended up in Egypt, where he was in a position to save his family. Though they had their difficulties, the Lord made those twelve quibbling brothers the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Bible tells us that Jesus too had siblings (Matthew 13:55-56). We are told these brothers were probably from Joseph's first marriage. Some of them were involved in his ministry and others tried to discourage him (Galatians 1:19; Mark 3:21). His mother had concerns

about his ministry, but the Lord made sure his mother was taken care of when he was dying on the cross, calling John, his beloved disciple, Mary's new son (John 19:27).

### **Making the Best of It**

There is a reason why Jesus had such a negative view of divorce. He famously noted that it was never God's intent, but allowed due to the sinful nature of humanity (Matthew 19:8-9). Divorce all too often leads to hostility on both sides, with children, family, teachers/school administrators, and church members/leaders caught in the middle. The non-custodial parent may not have filed for divorce and is saddened by not only the demise of the relationship, but also the regular contact with their child(ren). Unfortunately, according to the Barna Research Group, conservative Christians have a higher rate of divorce than other faith groups or even atheists (1999). Some researchers believe this is due to conflict between spouses over Christian beliefs where one spouse is more "liberal" and the other more "conservative." This can lead to negatively judging the other spouse, which contributes to the relationship's demise.

As hard as it is, the best thing to do is to make peace with the ex. There could be very legitimate reasons to be very angry at your ex for things that happened during the marriage or after the divorce. At this point, when the love is gone, divorced couples will not be as motivated to try and repair the relationship. For the sake of the children and your own sanity, forgiveness is the best way to go. Forgiveness does not excuse the other of their misdeeds; It allows you to let go of the hurt and anger the situation has caused.

Closely examine the mistakes you have made throughout the relationship and divorce. Asking forgiveness from your ex can help decrease hostility on their end. This self-reflection can also help in learning from past mistakes so as not to repeat them in future relationships. Whether or not you are able to decrease hostility with your ex, you still need to show them respect. Your child is

related to and loves your ex, so by showing respect for your ex, you are showing respect for your child. You may have to be intentional at first, but it can become more natural eventually. It is hard to maintain a hostile attitude toward someone to whom you show respect.

When there is lack of communication between divorced parents, it is tempting to interrogate the child about your ex's behaviors. This makes the child feel like he or she is being asked to spy on their parent. This is particularly problematic as it relates to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and lifestyle. Since disagreement over religious beliefs puts relationships at risk, these issues can continue even after a divorce. When a child is with the non-custodial parent every other weekend, this time period includes the Sabbath. The custodial parent may worry how the non-custodial parent is observing Sabbath. This is one of the difficulties of divorce. When the non-custodial parent has custody of the child it is up to them on how to spend their time (within reason of course). Parents will just have to let go of the differences they have about parenting styles and try to explain why your parenting differs from your ex's.

Parenting time guidelines guarantee minimum time with the child for the non-custodial parent. This does not mean that it has to be set in stone. If hostility can be decreased, the custodial parent may be more open and flexible for increasing time for the non-custodial parent, as long as it isn't too disruptive for the child.

Another way for non-custodial parents to be more involved in their child's life is through school. Non-custodial parents can request schools send a second set of materials alerting them to school events that the custodial parent may not have mentioned. Make sure to attend parent/teacher conferences, concerts, and sport events. This shows your child you care about their academic development. Children benefit from parents being involved with their school.

When there is hostility between divorced parents, custody exchange may be a time of conflict. This is particularly problematic for children who find these situations fearful and uncomfortable. Safety and entrapment may

also be a concern. Some parents have found exchanging the child in a public setting such as a restaurant, library, school, or police station can decrease conflict during these times. It may be appropriate the parents to arrange pick-up and drop-off through a third party in a public setting to minimize conflict.

When custody disagreements arise, as they often do, mediation may be a better route than court litigation. Research has found that when mediation has been used, the non-custodial parent sees the child more than their litigation counterparts (Emery, 2004). As a non-custodial parent, the odds of building a strong and long-lasting relationship with a child is stronger if the parent uses mediation instead of litigation. The custodial parent is more likely view the non-custodial parent in a positive light as well (Emery, 2004). Positive communication and a good relationship with the co-parents tends to build the relationship between children and their non-custodial parent.

Divorce hurts, but there can be healing. With support from the Lord, friends, family, and church members, the non-custodial parent can get through these difficulties. Life after divorce will eventually become the "new normal." The limited time with your child may make you feel that you really cannot be a parent. Make the best of the time you have with your children by not being too critical, controlling, or permissive.

Many non-custodial parents look forward to the time when the child is 18. This gives them an opportunity to rebuild a relationship with their child based on decisions between them and their child, minus court involvement. Young adult children still need guidance from their parents as they face real world problems they may feel unprepared to face. This offers opportunity to rebuild a broken relationship between parent and child.

### **Custodial Parent as Support**

Custodial parents can be supportive in various ways. Though the primary custody



arrangement may have been the best arrangement at the time of divorce, it does not mean the parenting time guidelines have to be rigidly followed. For the sake of the child, custodial parents should try to encourage the child's relationship with the non-custodial parent by allowing as much face to face contact as possible. In cases where there has been bouts of dangerous neglect and abuse. The child may have real issues with their non-custodial parent. The custodial parent can help them understand their estranged parent's behavior within context and explain how both parents contributed to the relationship demise.

Custodial parents may be concerned about an ex's parenting style and choices, the improved relationship between ex and child will outweigh most of those concerns. They should explain the parenting differences between them and their ex so that the child understand what is taking place. Custodial parents can also play a role in decreasing hostility between themselves and the ex. Forgiveness is the key! Forgiveness begins with understanding the other person's behaviors, focusing on the benefits of forgiveness, then letting go by allowing the Lord to speak to your heart to forgive the other person. Research has found that when the custodial parent has a good relationship with the non-custodial parent, the non-custodial parent is more likely to stay involved in their child's life (Castillo & Sarver, 2012).

### **Family as Support**

The family of the non-custodial parent can be helpful as well. In some ways being a non-custodial parent has less day to day parenting responsibilities, but that does not mean that there will not be a significant investment of time. Every other weekend has to be devoted to the child. They may or may not be able to join in on family gatherings or holidays. It helps when families understand and just try to be supportive. Extended family can help to bridge the gaps between divorced spouses or alienated children. Family should try to stay in touch with the children as much as possible trying to make those times as positive as possible.

### **Church as Support**

As mentioned earlier, church members can get caught in the middle and it is tempting to take sides. The Bible urges believers not to judge others (Matthew 7:1). Judging is not the role for humans; it's God's job! As a Christian it is easy to look at others' behaviors then measure them against God's standards. But all of us have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). What divorced couples need is support and encouragement. Kids caught up in this situation benefit from that support as well. In addition to support, church leaders should be aware of parenting time guidelines to help protect the parent/child relationship that can easily be infringed upon because of life events or hostility between exes.

### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. What are three (3) ways in which your parenting of your child has changed since becoming a non-custodial parent?
2. Share three (3) strategies that you employ to keep the exchange of your child peaceful?
3. Indicate various ways in which you as the non-custodial parent utilize the parenting time guidelines in parenting of your child.
4. If you used mediation, how was it helpful to you as the non-custodial parent in resolving custody matters with the custodial parent?
5. State some key ways that you utilize to continually communicate with your child when she or he is with the custodial parent?
6. Explain some of the ways in which family and close friends can be more supportive of you in your role as a non-custodial parent?
7. Discuss how being a non-custodial parent affects your professional work?
8. What could the custodial parent do differently to better support the co-parenting of your child?



9. List thee (3) key strengths you possess which help you to be a successful non-custodial parent.
10. Discuss three (3) non-confrontational ways to share your thoughts with the custodial parent concerning the parenting of your child?
11. Specify three (3) ways in which the local church can be more helpful to non-custodial parents and their children.
12. Identify three (3) areas in which you need to grow to become a better non-custodial parent to your family, including to the custodial parent.

### Additional Adapted Biblical Texts

- “As a mother [Custodial Parent] comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13, NIV)
- “Fathers [Custodial and Non-Custodial Parents], do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, NIV)
- Fathers [Custodial and Non-Custodial Parents], do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21, NIV).
- “[Non-Custodial and Custodial Parents] train a child in the way he (she) should go, and when he (she) is old he (she) will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6, NIV).
- “Older men [Non-Custodial Parents] are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women [Custodial Parents] likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women [Child’s Parent] to love their husbands [Child’s Parent], to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands [Child’s Parent], so that the word of God will not be dishonored” (Titus 2:2-5, NASB).

Which of you fathers [Non-Custodial and Custodial Parents], if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you [Non-Custodial and Custodial Parents] then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:11-13, NIV).

### Additional Resources

#### Support for Non-Custodial Fathers

- <http://fathersrightsmovement.us>
- <https://www.facebook.com/MensDivorce/>

#### Resources on Mediation

- <https://www.grainmediation.com/2011/08/mediation-is-best-for-building-maintaining-relationships-between-non-custodial-parents-their-children/>
- <http://www.mediate.com/articles/vestalA2.cfm>
- [https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2016/09/shsconf\\_shw2016\\_00018.pdf](https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2016/09/shsconf_shw2016_00018.pdf)

#### Songs That Can Bring Healing

- <https://youtu.be/4-G3IAu5vzI>  
- I’ll Help You Cry
- <https://youtu.be/rRwQy2eQbJM>  
- I Trust You
- <https://youtu.be/4Fx3l2DMDh4>  
- I Almost Let Go
- <https://youtu.be/EHY2OIW5vo0>  
- I Still Want You
- <https://youtu.be/7jsEfYm7S-8>  
- Teach Me to Love
- [https://youtu.be/U-UAP\\_LMpqc](https://youtu.be/U-UAP_LMpqc)  
- The Best In Me
- <https://youtu.be/7JXFg5KEoXg>  
- Never Could Have Made It

- <https://youtu.be/kWe6A91dwTg>  
- I Choose to Worship
- <https://youtu.be/LnaHTOUigJM>  
- I Need You to Survive
- <https://youtu.be/mWFpj7S-Tbw>  
- The Strength of the Lord
- <https://youtu.be/UlfGuQR4c2o>  
- Broken, But I'm Healed
- <https://youtu.be/rFNHmA9a2gI>  
- Encourage Yourself
- <https://youtu.be/5GwOrVpudXI>  
- Healing
- <https://youtu.be/awtPSl6zFNU>  
- The Storm Is Over Now
- <https://youtu.be/-pD2zIuiC2g>  
- Break Every Chain
- [https://youtu.be/6p\\_UPlfM71k](https://youtu.be/6p_UPlfM71k)  
- I Can Begin Again
- [https://youtu.be/W\\_KS0DBv8-o](https://youtu.be/W_KS0DBv8-o)  
- My Life is In Your Hands
- <https://youtu.be/1t8vjgGQhZI>  
- Beyond What I Can See
- <https://youtu.be/OeZvzX218qk>  
- God Favored Me

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